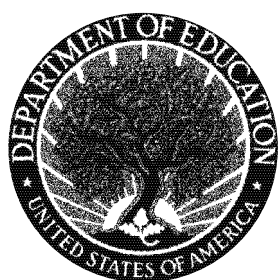


# NATIONAL GUIDE TO THE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM

## A Road Map to Employment and Independence for Individuals with Disabilities



U.S. Department of Education  
Office of Special Education & Rehabilitative Services  
Rehabilitation Services Administration



This handbook provides an overview of the State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program, which operates under the authority of the Rehabilitation Act and its amendments. Its purpose is to give State and local officials, program operators, individuals with disabilities, and the general public information about the VR program and the services available through the program.

The handbook highlights major features of the VR program and provides information about program structure, eligibility and service delivery. It is not intended to provide a detailed summary of the Rehabilitation Act, nor convey a legal opinion or interpretation of the legislation.

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Today, more than 43 million Americans live with one or more physical or mental disabilities. Nearly 17 million of these individuals are working age, and have a disability that limits the type or amount of work they are able to do. Most of these individuals are not working. Many others are working, but in jobs that are not commensurate with their skills and capabilities.

Individuals with disabilities comprise one of the most disadvantaged groups in society. Many of these individuals have no access to transportation services; others face the loss of health coverage if they become employed. In many instances, individuals with disabilities lack the education, training and supports needed to get and keep jobs. All too often, barriers to employment are rooted in discrimination and long-held misperceptions about disability.

The U.S. Congress rightly concluded that individuals with disabilities have the same rights as other members of society. They have a right to live independently, make choices, and pursue and attain meaningful careers. They have a right to enjoy full inclusion and integration in the economic, political, social, cultural and educational mainstream of American society.

To ensure that individuals with disabilities realize those rights, Congress enacted the Rehabilitation Act (the Act) in 1973. The Act has been amended many times since then, most recently in August 1998.

Under the Act, States receive Federal grants to operate a comprehensive VR program for individuals with disabilities. The unifying mission behind the public VR program is to help individuals with disabilities prepare for and engage in employment consistent with each individual's strengths, interests, and aspirations.

The VR program is ultimately about employment. But the program is not only about getting jobs. It is about helping individuals with disabilities get jobs they find satisfying – jobs that anyone in society would be glad to have. The 1992 and 1998 Amendments describe this concept in terms of employment outcomes consistent with an individual's strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, and capabilities -- in other words, jobs that individuals with disabilities want, value, and can carry out.

People with disabilities want to go to work. For them, employment is the pathway to independence, self-sufficiency, and becoming contributing members of society. The VR program is one through which everyone can benefit: the work force gains productive and capable workers; social-service costs are reduced; and the quality of life for people with disabilities is improved.



**Fredric K. Schroeder**  
Commissioner  
Rehabilitation Services  
Administration

### History of the VR Program

In 1920 Congress passed the Smith-Fess Act to provide employment-related services to civilians with disabilities.

A major event in the history of the VR program was passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the legislation under which the current program is administered. The Act shifted the focus of the program to emphasize services to individuals with severe disabilities.

The 1986 Amendments to the Act increased the focus on the employment needs of individuals with disabilities, particularly individuals with the most severe disabilities, and promoted greater participation by the individual in planning for service provision.

The 1992 Amendments expanded program eligibility and further emphasized serving individuals with the most severe disabilities. The role of individuals in setting the direction of their vocational rehabilitation plans was expanded even more.

In 1998, further Amendments to the Act increased the individual's role in the rehabilitation process through informed choice, and emphasized quality employment outcomes.